

in defense of SDS

Mark Naison

Before we try to project where the left should be going, we've got to recognize that many brothers and sisters involved in the most serious political work no longer think in terms of an all-inclusive movement. To the regional organizers and national collective of SDS, the Progressive Labor party and all who share its opposition to black liberation struggles are traitors and enemies. To the Black Panther Party, Ron Karenga's US organization which murdered two Panther leaders in Los Angeles is a stain which must be purged from the black community at all costs. Whether these factional wars are a sign of the New Left's maturity or degeneration is open to debate. But it is an undeniable fact that as the American left has begun to emerge as a serious revolutionary force, those organizations in the forefront of the struggle are beginning to draw sharp ideological boundaries around their political work.

The speed with which the atmosphere of the struggle has changed has shocked many long time activists. Highly respected movement intellec-

tuals such as Julius Lester, Staughton Lynd, and Greg Calvert have publicly bemoaned the movement's new harshness in rhetoric and insularity in practice. To these writers, the ghost of "Stalinism" with its purges, its ponderous language, its racism posing as anti-racism, its vanguard pretensions and megalomaniac style—have come back to haunt us. After all the careful efforts made to establish the left on a fraternal, democratic basis, the leading radical organizations in the black and white community seem hell-bent on imitating the worst abuses of the old left.

Those of us who are the "Stalinists" in this situation therefore have a lot of explaining to do to people on the sidelines. Why are we kicking people out of SDS, waving red books, carrying (or talking about carrying) guns, and reviving tired concepts like the "vanguard" and the "revolutionary party."

The explanation goes deeper than "paranoia," "guilt," or "youthful adventurism." Fundamental changes in the movement's political analysis underlie these shifts in strategy and style. Many of the New Left's initial assumptions have been exposed as illusions during the crises of the past year. Through study, through struggle, through the force of repression, we've learned some basic political lessons.

First. That there is no significant possibility that American capitalism will progressively reform itself into a non-exploitative, socialist society. The election returns, the continuation of the war, the assassination of Kennedy and King, the police riots in Chicago, Berkeley and Madison, the brutal suppression of the Panthers and black student groups, and our growing (cumulative) knowledge about the meaning of imperialism have left us with the feeling that there can be no



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such thing as a peaceful, democratic transformation of American society. Every gain for oppressed or exploited people in the United States is paid for by greater exploitation of people in other segments of the American Empire. The old conception of agitators within the system is a bad dream. There are no more Radicals, only Revolutionaries.

Second. The idea that a new working class of technicians, professionals, and intellectuals will play the leading role in the transformation of advanced industrial society has been exposed as a myth. This was the year we saw New York City teachers strike harder against the black community than they ever did against the city, college professors denounce student radicals more passionately than they ever did the warmakers, and clerks, technicians and lower corporate personnel vote in larger numbers for Wallace than any social stratum except farmers. At the same time, discontent within the army, the expansion of the movement in the high schools and community colleges, the growth of wildcat strikes, and the unprecedented cooperation of students and workers in the French general strikes showed enormous untapped potential for radicalism among less privileged sectors of the working class, particularly the young. We began to see that much of the movements program and style, including its lack of discipline, its endless debates, its abhorrence of violence, reflected the class attitudes of students at the elite universities, and had to be changed as the movement spread to less privileged sectors.

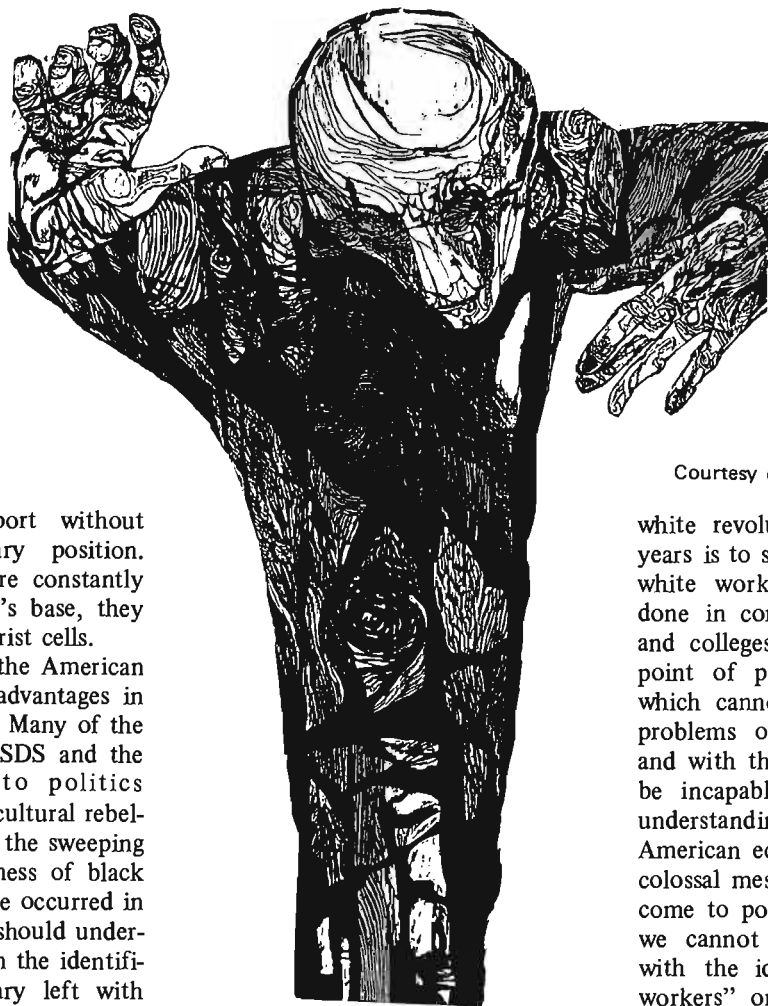
Third. We began to understand the pivotal role that national liberation struggles by Third-World peoples and black and brown minorities in America would play in bringing down imperialism. While Vietnam fought on, while student strikes paralyzed Mexico and Argentina, while guerilla activity increased in Guatemala and Venezuela, the black struggle in America also attained new heights of militancy and political sophistication. The nationwide growth of the Black Panther Party, the emergence of revolutionary black caucuses among auto and transit workers,

the initiation of armed struggle by black college students at North Carolina A&T and Cornell, the three-month shutdowns of CCNY and San Francisco State by "co-optable" black students, and the thousands of local struggles waged by black high school students and working people showed all but the racist and the blind where the major internal challenge to American imperialism was coming from. All of these activities were inspired by a nationalist impulse, but it was a nationalism that was moving far beyond "Hate Whitey." Under the leadership of SNCC, the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement and the Panthers, radical black spokesmen were showing how black power could be combined with a class analysis, and alliances formed with politically conscious whites who respected the black community's right to self determination.

These theoretical insights forced a complete reevaluation of the left's strategic thinking. For the first time in recent American history, black and white activists began to pay serious attention to the problem of the transfer of power, and have concluded that it is unlikely that socialism will come in America without destroying or neutralizing the armed power of the capitalist state. Given this conclusion it is not at all surprising that the theoreticians we are turning to for guidance are those who were engaged in the *practice* of revolutionary struggle: Lenin, Mao, Che, Lin Piao. Those who complain about the irrelevance of these thinkers to conditions in advanced industrial society ignore the methodological contributions they have made in integrating theory, political analysis, and military strategy into the Marxian framework. We are aware of the limitations of Leninism and Maoism as humane philosophy, but they are the only varieties of Marxism (there are at least 57) which have succeeded in establishing socialism in an important political area. For socialists who have lost all hope in the revolutionary possibilities of the electoral process or the "mass strike," it is a perspective we are forced to study seriously out of our very responsibility to *win the revolution*.

Our new theoretical stance has been criticized so hysterically that it has been hard to arrive at an objective understanding of our mistakes in practice in the last year. Vilified as "Stalinists," "totalitarians," and "suburban putchists," it has been tempting for us to regard any criticism as a betrayal of the struggle, or the product of a starry-eyed humanism which expects that a battle for socialism can be waged without corrupting many of those involved in it. But much of the criticism has been worthy of our concern. One point in particular is basic; even if the shift in our political perspective is correct, it has occurred so quickly that it has left our constituencies far behind. The political perspective of this essay is shared by perhaps 5000 people (although pivotal ones) around the country and their efforts at implementation have been clumsy at best. Both the Panthers and the Revolutionary Youth Movement Caucus in SDS have acquired the habit of attacking anyone who disagrees with them as counterrevolutionary. Such practices are *particularly* dangerous for a revolutionary group. Even as we become more disciplined, we must be careful to leave open channels within the movement where people can make the transition from liberalism or apathy to radicalism.

Any projection of where the revolutionary left should be going in the next ten years must come to terms with this tension between openness and internal discipline. If revolutionary struggle is to succeed, there must be cadre organization within factories, the military, the police and pivotal schools, communities and government bureaucracies. These collective have to be capable of initiating action to shut down the economy and the state apparatus, and to defend that action militarily or neutralize the state's military response. But at the same time, these collectives have to grow out of organization which brings revolutionary politics to the people, which makes the transfer of power acceptable and understandable, and provides for free discussion of the movements ultimate objectives. Considerable attention must be given in the future to ways of



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consolidating mass support without sacrificing a revolutionary position. Unless vanguard cadres are constantly expanding the movement's base, they will wither into sour terrorist cells.

Despite its weakness, the American left has certain natural advantages in transcending this problem. Many of the new Marxist-Leninists in SDS and the Panthers have come to politics through involvement in "cultural rebellions" and are sensitive to the sweeping changes in the consciousness of black and white youth that have occurred in the past ten years. They should understand the need to maintain the identification of the revolutionary left with the liberating cultural currents of the time, even as the parasitic and elitist aspect of the culture are criticized. We must make a disciplined effort to avoid a formulistic approach to culture and consider people's inner needs as seriously as their material interests.

This places a great responsibility on the radical media. No other activity can play a greater role in counteracting elitist tendencies within the left and we should look forward to its dramatic expansion. The year 1979 should see nationwide revolutionary newspapers such as the Guardian and the Black Panther with circulations of over a million, the emergence of mass circulation left magazines, and the commensurate growth of community newspapers, film groups, street theatre, rock and blues bands, and radio stations (licensed or underground) that grow out of local organizing. But at the same time, the revolutionary artists, journalists, and scholars have to take special effort to avoid the mentality and practice of an *intellectual*

caste. This involves two responsibilities: a) To do all their intellectual and artistic work in autonomous radical media (and contribute to their organizational development) and b) To participate in collectives and mass organizations in the local areas. Both of these principles cut through the dangerous division between critics and organizers which plagues the left today (such as the incredible hostility between academic "socialists" and movement activists.) They should organizationally link art and theory to the construction of new institutions. In the development of radical media, the revolutionary left should be working to "create the new society within the womb of the old."

Local organizing should seek to follow the same principles, but the task (to put it mildly) will be more difficult. The primary responsibility of

white revolutionaries in the next ten years is to spread the movement to the white working class. This has to be done in communities, in high schools and colleges, in the army, and at the point of production. Any movement which cannot relate to the day-to-day problems of struggling with scarcity, and with the productive apparatus will be incapable of developing a serious understanding of the operations of the American economy, and would make a colossal mess if by accident it ever did come to power. But at the same time, we cannot just jump into organizing with the idea of "learning from the workers" or with the expectation that once some mystical unit called the "working class" is aroused, the socialist revolution is a foregone conclusion. The type of motion, the type of actions we organize, even around very immediate issues, have to be of a kind that generate revolutionary consciousness and an orientation toward power, not just narrow class interest. In particular, white workers just like everyone else we want in the movement have to relate to the international character of the American political economy and the special oppression of black people within America. Struggles have to be sought, and education programs run which challenge white nationalism, which enable white workers, like the rest of us, to see their interest linked to a revolution which will use the productive apparatus of America in the interests of *all working people who have been oppressed by American imperialism*.

What does this mean in practice? First, that the primary focus be on

organizing working class youth, particularly in areas where the black liberation movement has begun to generate tensions. Blue collar youth and young workers don't have as strong a commitment to racism as their parents: they don't have a mortgage to protect, a skill category to defend, or (on the cultural side) a depression psychology of militant anti-communism. They see both a society collapsing around (and on top of) them and the beginnings of resistance. Our role will be to pull them into that resistance through actions which challenge the growing militarization of the society and the deterioration of working class life. This means fights against curfews, pigs in the schools, plant speedups, sellout union bureaucracies, roundups for the draft, repression in the army. It means efforts to draw working class kids into anti-war and anti-imperialist struggles—street demonstrations, campus take-overs, defense actions against groups hit by repression. And it means extended efforts to ally working class youth with black people already in motion—the Panthers, black labor caucuses, and black student groups—and to explain how the black liberation movement creates revolutionary possibilities for the entire working class. Unlike traditional “community organizers” we'll be rapping about imperialism and the need for revolution from the beginning. We'll be laying down a strategy for a youth movement that fights, and bringing kids in on their perception of a totality of oppression.

Secondly, we should orient our organizing toward the goal of citywide and regional movements as quickly as possible. For the next few years, much of the revolutionary left's organizing will take place in neighborhoods. Organizers will be moving into working class areas and making their contacts, doing educational work, and mobilizing kids into militant action around local and national issues. But as soon as this organizing begins to take effect, connections should be made between various organizing projects, people brought into each others struggles, and efforts made to plan strategy on a city-wide level. Once this point is

reached, the politics of the revolution become clear in a way that can take us beyond the stage of the youth movement. As struggles against the pigs and army are tied in with labor strikes and protests against cutbacks in public service (schools, hospitals, libraries, welfare, public transportation) an important political point emerges: that the economic squeeze on the working class and blacks is part of a general crisis of imperialism, a crisis which requires more and more pigs to keep order. From there it's a question of power, ours or theirs. We begin to work toward a point where every local picket line, street demonstration, occupation, or defense action, will be joined by people from all over a region and where every step taken to repress us will be met by the involvement of more and more people.

Third, we need to draw a network of cadres and collectives from the regional movements which begin to map out revolutionary strategy to define and develop the structure of the new society. These groups will probably only have begun to develop on a serious scale in the next ten years, and there is great danger in their being created prematurely out of frustration with the speed of local organizing work. But in a society with a repressive apparatus as effective as this one, and with such a complex social structure, it is in such collectives that the basic framework of the revolutionary movement must be hammered out. Specifically, the military aspect of revolutionary activity and the coordination between white and black movements will have to be planned at this level. Neither of these pivotal and delicate tasks can be approached in a completely open fashion.

Still, these critical responsibilities only underline the need to have collectives grow out of practice and in a climate of widespread support. The principles of armed struggle and alliance with the black liberation movement have to be emphasized and practiced in all aspects of our organizing in strikes, mass demonstrations, and local liberation movements like the battle for People's Park. Only as large segments of the working population,

black and white, become accustomed to the idea of struggling against the armed power of the state will there be any hope of a socialist revolution. Elitism by cadres must be fought at every point without sacrificing the movement's politics. We must not allow the revolution to be isolated from the mass of the American people.

None of this is going to be easy. We have an awesome task: We must make a revolution in the heartland of the most powerful empire that man has ever created, with an international political economy attuned to the tactics of divide and conquer, a working class divided by deep racial hate, and an apparatus of repression that staggers the imagination. In ten years, if we are still alive, we will have just begun to develop the mass support to be a serious revolutionary threat, and we will be harassed and murdered and incarcerated in an effort to stop us. We have only to look at the Panthers to know that the Man doesn't fuck around. Twenty Panthers dead, hundreds in jail on trumped-up charges, virtually all their local offices shot up, bombed and burned. We'll get the same and more when we begin to build support among the people. It makes a lot of us hesitate, draw back from politics. Is the revolution worth all this bloodshed, all this risk? Is it worth the faction fights, the sense of corruption we feel as leaders or fighters, the ego trips?

But then we begin to think. About a South African native quarter. A Vietnamese peasant scarred by napalm. A Bolivian miner. A university plaza in Mexico City filled with dead bodies. Sic kids on a roof in Harlem shooting junk blood. An Arkansas prison farm. A toilet in a Mississippi gas station saying “white only,” Gary Indiana, Cairo, Illinois. Thirty-eight thousand dead boys. One million dead people. American imperialism. It's a real thing. Not just words, not just pictures on a television screen. Not just a bad dream, but blood and suffering and exploitation.

When you face that fact, there ain't nothing to do but fight.

Power to the People.

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